Almost a Blue-

by LCdr. Michael Miklaski

How many of us have a cross-country tale where a good deal turned into a nightmare? Most cross-countries live up to our expectations, but every once in a while, something turns so bad that we have to stop and assess just what caused it to go wrong. This is a story about one of those flights.

I consider myself lucky to have a wife who lets me do cross-countries on a regular basis. When you're stationed in Japan, the cross-country locations are decent. The caveat was that I had to buy some nice (read expensive) trinkets or complete 75 percent of the shopping list she handed to me at the door to keep my good-deal meter running. This particular trip was to Osan, and, fortunately, I still had enough in the bank account to meet the demands of the agreement.

This flight was to be an easy, relaxing hop—just ring out the back end while the pilots got their instrument nav checks. After an uneventful trip out to Osan, we refueled and secured our Hawkeye, bagged some lunch, and headed out the main gate for shop-till-you-drop ops.

The next day, after completing our secondary mission, we had the goodies brown-paper wrapped at the pack-and-wrap. After depositing the larger items at the post office for the free ride home (a benny of being overseas: free mail), we headed back to the plane. The preflight planning and crew briefing went smoothly. As we briefed crew duties during engine starts, we decided I would be the lucky one to draw the job of plane captain. When an E-2 goes on a cross-country, one of the NFOs usually functions as a plane captain to ensure that everything is done correctly, particularly when at another service's base. This duty includes briefing the ground crew on our start procedures, what to expect and when, and what to do in an emergency.

We told the airman at base ops that we needed a ride to our aircraft and asked him to tell the ground-maintenance personnel to meet us at the aircraft for the start. As we pulled up to the aircraft, I noticed that the start-cart was positioned exactly where we asked it to be placed, outboard the starboard nacelle, with the exhaust positioned behind the wing. The electrical cart was just behind, with all the connections made. An Air Force sergeant approached us as we got out of the truck and introduced himself as the entire start crew. He apologized that he was the only one, but because there was an exercise going on, all the others were working elsewhere.

The first thing I noticed about him was that he was about 6 feet 5 inches tall. The next was that he wore only a T-shirt, cammie pants, yellow sun glasses, and had his Mickey Mouse ears around his neck (no cranial).

As the rest of the crew started preflighting, I briefed him. Walking him around the aircraft, I described the entire procedure. First, we would start the starboard engine, then he would have to pull the air hose, then move the air cart to the port side and do it again, finally returning to the starboard side to remove the electrical cords. I walked the dog with all the hand signals. He assured me he would be looking at me during the entire start sequence.

Most importantly, I instructed him on how to approach the nacelle. I directed him to walk down the wing line until he reached the nacelle, then duck underneath the exhaust, and proceed forward into the wheelwell to remove the hose. Next, he was supposed to go to the fuselage electric-power receptacles and remove the plugs, then exit the area in reverse order. He listened intently as I emphasized that under no circumstance was he to approach the exhaust or the props. The sergeant dutifully acknowledged that he understood the consequences of not heeding my warnings.

While I was briefing him, I asked if he had ever worked around props before. He said that he had, around C-130s, but not with an aircraft where the props were so close to the ground, nor where he would have to approach them so close. I assured him that if he heeded my words of wisdom, nothing would go wrong. He then donned his hearing protectors and yellow sunglasses and manned the air cart.

Suit Julienne

The starboard-engine start went like clockwork. I directed the sergeant to remove the air hose; he acknowledged and started to work his way toward the nacelle. As I kept a wary eye on him, he did exactly as instructed, removing the air hose and moving out of the nacelle. All the time, I could see he had one eye on the prop, which was good; at least I was sure he wouldn't walk into it. Fear is sometimes a good thing.

He then moved the air cart to the port side and duplicated the procedure. When both engines were turning, he moved the cart out of the way and returned to the starboard side of the aircraft to remove the power cord and move the electrical cart.

The PIC directed the removal of the power cords, which I acknowledged and telegraphed to the sergeant. He rogered the signal and this is where time shifted to slow motion. For some reason, he picked up a brisk pace toward the engine about four to six feet behind the wing. I could tell he had no intention of ducking underneath the engine exhaust. I guess he was confident after having approached the engines twice. I tried to get his attention, but he wasn't looking at me. All I could do from that point was watch.

When he finally reached the exhaust flow, in the full erect position, it looked as if someone had punched him in the head. His head went straight back and his feet got airborne in the opposite direction. He hit the ground and started rolling aft, with his Mickey Mouse ears and sunglasses tumbling ahead of him, being blown toward a grassy area just behind the E-2.

I signaled the pilots to stand by and ran around the starboard wing and then aft toward the sergeant. By the time I reached him, he was hunched over covering his eyes. I moved him out of the exhaust area and went after his glasses and ears. When I returned, he was rubbing his eyes and was complaining about them burning. This is when I got a good look at his face. Most of his hair was singed, his eyebrows were all but gone, and his eyes were red from the heat and fumes.

After a few minutes, he assured me he felt good enough to get back to his work center on his own. I recommended he go to the first-aid station instead. I found out later that he wasn't injured.

When I finally got in the E-2 (I had to close the main entrance hatch myself, seems he didn't want to approach the port engine again), I told the crew about the incident. The pilots initially thought there might have

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been a fire in the right engine because of my hasty departure. However, they didn't have a fire light, that I hadn't gone for the fire bottle and was last seen running past the engine. Still, because they couldn't see, they had no idea what was happening. I had no way or time to let them know exactly what was going on.

A few weeks later, a different crew returned on another good deal flight, and I asked if the sergeant was OK. The other ground crew members said that he was, but he had no intentions of starting any more E-2s. Can't say that I blame him.

Now, whenever I go on cross-countries, I insist on more than one person as a start crew, and always use this story to emphasize the importance of respecting turboprop engines and exhausts. I still wonder today if I could have prevented this incident. Had this sergeant been wearing a cranial, eye covers, and a long-sleeved shirt, he might have avoided the injuries he received, despite his lapse in judgement. Everyone must respect a turning aircraft engine. That's why we paint those nice warnings at the intakes and exhausts. We need to heed those warnings regardless of service, particularly if it has a huge food processor on the front of the engine.

LCdr. Miklaski flies with VAW-115. At the time of this incident, he was a first-tour JO.

We can all re-learn the dangers of working around unfamiliar aircraft. Although this story concerns an Air Force-Navy setup, how many times have you seen a Sailor or Marine walk into danger, even though he knows the consequences. It happens, and we always need to be on guard, ground and flight crews—Ed.

On Cat 1

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